

Gingrich, the Star, Finds Both Fans and Critics

Public Conflicted Over Ideas, Style

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ATLANTA, April 13—With Newt Gingrich as honoree, the affair had all the glitzy accoutrements of a '90s-style coronation: exquisite food and spotlights, a mini-concert by country rocker Travis Tritt, testimonials from the lions of Georgia business and politics and a video of the House speaker's career.

The occasion was a \$500-a-plate fund-raiser Wednesday night for the state chapter of the March of Dimes, which named Gingrich its "Georgia Citizen of the Year," the first time such an award has even been given. This is what life is like for the reigning king of American politics, 100 days into his term as speaker. The evening, he gushed, was like "living out a movie."

But like any movie with Newt Gingrich (R) as star, this one also drew the fury of critics, namely a diverse collection of 70 protesters who marched and chanted and ultimately tried to crash the event before being thwarted by police. The episode was a reminder that even as Gingrich is celebrated, his ideas,

See GINGRICH, A7, Col. 1

GINGRICH, From A1

his style, his temperament are sources of deep division within the country.

As he prepares to embark on the next phase of his revolution, the "Contract With America" behind him, the former history professor faces an uneasy public—one that gives him high marks for strength and vision but fears that he is too partisan and his views too extreme.

"The man is vicious," said Joseph Criscuolo, a 77-year-old retired businessman who is concerned about Republican changes to Medicare and thus joined the protest Wednesday night. "We're watching Newt. Whenever he shows up we'll be there."

The anxiety about Gingrich, however, is not limited to picket lines largely populated by liberal activists like Criscuolo. Even though the March of Dimes honored Gingrich, officials of the organization have met with him to express concerns about Republican proposals "that would curb or obstruct progress we're making in reducing infant mortality rates and improving overall birth outputs," as Brian Ziegler, director of the Georgia chapter put it.

Recent polls tell the story of America's conflicted feelings about Gingrich, who came to Congress 16 years ago at age 35, determined to destroy the Democrats' grip on the Capitol.

A Washington Post-ABC News survey found that while 57 percent of those interviewed believe he has a vision for the future of the country, 61 percent don't believe he "understands the problems of people like you." While 52 percent say he is getting things done, 52 percent don't think he

is honest and trustworthy. And while 55 percent consider him to be a strong leader, 53 percent say his views are too extreme.

Other recent polls reported similar topsy-turvy results. A Wall Street Journal/NBC News poll indicated that a majority of Americans believe the GOP-controlled Congress is having a more positive than negative effect on the country. But when it comes to Gingrich himself, 27 percent view him positively, while 39 percent view him negatively.

In a New York Times/CBS News poll only 16 percent said they view him favorably. And respondents are sharply divided over his job performance: 39 percent approve, 34 percent disapprove.

Robert Lichter, director of the Center for Media and Public Affairs, sees a correlation between the polling data and what he sees as the generally negative portrayal Gingrich has received in the media.

"People are kind of parroting back what they've been told," said Lichter. "People are learning bad things about Newt Gingrich from his media coverage. Whether that's justified or not is a separate value judgment."

And what does Gingrich think of the polls that show his leadership has not yet translated into popularity?

"I don't worry about them," he said. "My job is to be the best speaker I can be and figure out that over time it'll all come out in the wash. I don't think anybody could propose the scale of change we proposed and not take a fair amount of pressure in the press. I think that's just life. It doesn't bother me at all."

In fact it does seem to bother Gin-



Country music singer Travis Tritt poses with honoree Newt Gingrich.

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grich, who has not hesitated to tongue lash reporters or denounce critical media coverage. Does he think the problems with his public image are a result of the media?

"Some of it's my fault," he said. "Nobody ever expected to move as rapidly as we did from being the Republican whip in the minority to being somebody in the middle of the national debate. I think I've clearly made some mistakes along the way, but what the heck."

In the next two months, said Gingrich, he will focus House Republicans on only a handful of issues and try to

improve communication with the public. "If we can engage the American people in a dialogue on improving Medicare, saving the baby boomers' retirement and relieving... younger Americans from the debt burden that currently is going to crush them... we'll do fine," he said.

A self-described revolutionary, Gingrich has long been more tornado than gentle breeze. At times he can appear to be magnanimous, at times petty. Sometimes his course can be dictated by whether he perceives you are with him or against him.

Syd Butler, executive director of

the Bethesda, Md.-based American Zoo and Aquarium Association, has been meeting regularly with Gingrich to offer advice on environmental issues. He said he found the speaker "instantly likable" and "during our meetings seemed in no way distracted and wishing he were elsewhere."

"I found myself responding to his vision and enthusiasm," said Butler. "I think the guy may have been misrepresented. I've never seen the alleged wicked side of Newt Gingrich actually displayed."

Rep. Cynthia McKinney (D-Ga.), however, tells a different story. During a White House Christmas party after the 1994 elections, before things got heated in the House, Gingrich suggested to McKinney they get together to talk about redistricting—an issue that concerned both given the legal challenges to McKinney's majority-black district and past efforts of Georgia Democrats to carve up Gingrich's district to suit their political needs.

But that was before McKinney joined the Democratic chorus that has been regularly sounding off on Gingrich on the floor. When she saw him on a plane headed to Atlanta recently and brought up redistricting, "he snapped his head around," McKinney recalled, and told her: "I have nothing to say to you."

It is clear that Democrats see Gingrich as something akin to the all-powerful Wizard of Oz. If only they can expose him as a fraud, they figure, the GOP majority he built will come crashing to the ground.

That's why Rep. Maxine Waters (D-Calif.) put out a seven-page paper as the House recessed titled, "The

Real Story of Newt Gingrich's First Hundred Days." And that's why the Democratic Congressional Campaign Committee's recent newsletter featured a chart noting that "if 19,500 voters had switched their vote from Republican to Democratic in the 13 closest House races last fall, Newt Gingrich would not be the speaker of the House today."

This laser-like focus on taking out Gingrich, says GOP strategist William Kristol, reflects "a kind of grudging respect for his almost unique combination of strategic vision and tactical skill."

"He's taken on the establishment and the conventional wisdom to a greater degree than almost any American political figure," said Kristol, "and he's taken them on successfully."

But Democrats have also been successful in framing Gingrich—just as he was often successful in framing them when he was a bomb thrower in the minority. Though Democrats and Republicans continue to argue about whether programs for the poor are being brutally cut or just reorganized more efficiently, polls show the Democratic view is resonating.

Julia Onderko, 59, a homemaker and registered independent in Hazelton, Pa., surveyed in the Post-ABC poll, had this to say about Gingrich: "I don't think he has ever been hungry," she said, "or he wouldn't treat the poor people the way he has. For God's sake, to talk about making orphanages for children of unwed parents. I mean that's really outrageous."

And Gingrich has not talked about orphanages for months.
